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Message Text

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17
ACTION EA-06

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 H-01 INR-05 PM-03 L-01 PA-01

PRS-01 SP-02 CIAE-00 NSC-05 NSCE-00 DODE-00 /040 W
---------- 007257
R 130610Z JAN 75
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8900
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY SAIGON

C O N F I D E N T I A L PHNOM PENH 0692

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CB
SUBJ: THE MOOD OF PHNOM PENH

1. THE EMBASSY HAS TRIED TO LIMIT ITS REPORTING ON THE KC DRY SEASON CAMPAIGN, WHICHBEGAN JANUARY 1, TO FAIRLY OBJECTIVE STATEMENTS OF THE PRINCIPAL FACTS AND DEVELOPMENTS. THE CAMPAIGN HAS SO FAR GONE FAIRLY WELL FOR THE GKR (THE DEFENSES OF PHNOM PENH HAVE HELD, ENEMY CASUALTIES HAVE BEEN TWICE THOSE OF THE FRIENDLY SIDE), WITH THE NOTABLE EXCEPTION OF THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE OF MEKONG CONVOYS--STILL HANGING IN THE BALANCE. YET IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THIS REPORTING HAS CONVEYED A SOMEWHAT FALSE IMPRESSION OF THE MOOD OF THE CITY AND ITS RESIDENTS.

2. IN THE PAST 12 DAYS, OVER 100 107MM ROCKETS HAVE BEEN FIRED UPON THE CITY AND THE AIRPORT AREAS, MANY LANDING IN WELL-POPU-LATED AREAS. SEVERAL HAVE HIT THE CENTRAL MARKET AREA DOWNTOWN, A NUMBER HAVE LANDED AROUND THE OLD ROYAL PALACE, AND YESTERDAY ONE CAME CLOSE TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING. ANOTHER HIT AND DAMAGED THE HOME OF FRANCOIS PEREZ, THE SWISS NATIONAL WHO REPRESENTS THE ICRC, SOME TEN MINUTES AFTER HE HAD LEFT IT. THAT SAME ROCKET WAS ALSO TEN METERS FROM THE HOME OF CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES AND OF THE AMERICAN, FATHER GEHRING, WHO DIRECTS
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THEIR EFFORTS HERE.

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3. AMONG THE NON-KHMER COMMUNITY, THERE IS AN UNDERSTANDABLE AIR OF SOME TENSION, FORTUNATELY NOT AS YET TRANSLATED INTO ANY MOVES TO DEPART, THOUGH THERE HAS BEEN SOME QUIET CONSULTATION, BRUSHING UP ON EVACUATION PLANS, AND THE LIKE. A GROUP PARTICULARLY TO BE WATCHED ARE THE FRENCH, WITH SOME 1500 RESIDENTS, INCLUDING THE FACULTY OF A LARGE SECONDARY SCHOOL, THE LYCEE DESCARTES. THIS SCHOOL WAS CLOSED IN A GENERAL FRENCH EXODUS A YEAR AGO, AND A REPETITION OF THIS WOULD HAVE A SERIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT UPON THE KHMERS. ANOTHER GROUP TO WATCH ARE THE AMERICAN AND OTHER FOREIGN NATIONAL EMPLOYEES OF THE VOLUNTARY AGENCIES, WHO ARE DOING A SPLENDED JOB WITH THE 50,000 NEW REFUGEES CREATED IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS. MANY OF THESE PEOPLE ARE RECENTLY ARRIVED IN COUNTRY, WITH LITTLE PRIOR EX-PERIENCE OF WARTIME CONDITIONS, INCOMING ROCKETS, AND THE LIKE. EMBASSY PERSONNEL ARE DOING WHAT THEY CAN TO CALM AND STEADY THIS IMPORTANT GROUP, AND THE AMBASSADOR HAS A MEETING WITH THEM PLANNED FOR JAN 14 FOR THIS PURPOSE.

4. AMONG THE KHMERS, THERE HAS SO FAR BEEN A GENERAL FEELING OF CONFIDENCE IN FANK'S ABILITY TO HOLD THE LINE, THOUGH THERE IS AN UNDERLYING APPREHENSION OVER DEVELOPMENTS ON THE MEKONG AND THEIR POSSIBLE EFFECT ON FUTURE RESUPPLY OF THE CITY. COUPLED WITH THIS, IS A GROWING BITTERNESS AT THE TACTICS OF THE KC: THE MASSACRE AT ANG SNOUL AND THE KILLING OF THE NUNS AT PHNOM BASSET, THE INDISCRIMINATE ROCKETING WITH ITS TOLL OF INNOCENT CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN KILLED AND MAIMED, THE TACTIC OF GUNNING DOWN FLEEING REFUGEES. WHILE THIS GROWING SPIRIT OF ANTIPATHY TOWARD THE ENEMY HAS NOT SO FAR RESULTED IN ANY RUSH TO THE COLORS OR UPSURGE IN RE-CRUITING, IT IS A NONETHELESS OBSERVABLE PHENOMENON.

5. ONE SIGN OF CONTINUED CONFIDENCE HAS BEEN THE STEADINESS OF LOCAL PRICES AND OF THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE RATE. THERE HAS BEEN NO OBSERVABLE FLIGHT OF CAPITAL, AND THE BLACK MARKET RATE HAS BEEN STEADY AT AROUND 1700 RIELS TO THE DOLLAR. THE PRICE OF GOLD LOCALLY IS MUCH BELOW THAT OF NEIGHBORING SAIGON, AND APPROXIMATES PREVAILING WORLD PRICES.

6. PRESUMABLY BECAUSE THE RISE IN INTENSITY OF THE WAR HERE
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HAS BEEN OVERSHADOWED BY ACTIVITY IN VIET-NAM, THERE HAS NOT BEEN MUCH INFLUX OF OUTSIDE JOUNALISTS, A NOTABLE EXCEPTION BEING THE NEW YORK TIMES' SIDNEY SCHANBERG, OUT OF SINGAPORE, WHOSE PAPER HAS APPARENTLY ASKED HIM TO STICK AROUND FOR AWHILE (PERHAPS TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO THE FIRST CONVOY). CBS TV HAS HAD A CAMERAMAN IN TOWN WHO HAS BEEN ACTIVE, FROM WHAT WE HEAR, THOUGH WE HAVE HAD NO PLAYBACK FROM THE DEPART-MENT ON THE USE OF HIS MATERIAL.

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6. AS THE DEPARTMENT IS AWARE, THIS EMBASSY HAS SO FAR MAINTANED A POLICY, WELL KNOWN TO THE REMAINDER OF THE FOREIGN COMMUNITY, OF PERMITTING VOLUNTARY VISITS OF DEPENDENTS FROM NEIGHBORING SAFEHAVENS. WE BELIEVE THAT THIS HAS HELPED TO BOLSTER MORALE AMOUNG THE OTHER EMBASSIES WHO, ALONG WITH THE KHMERS, ARE VERY SENSITIVE TO AMERICAN ACTIONS AND REACTIONS.

7. IN SHORT, THE MOOD OF PHNOM PENH IS REASONABLY CALM SO FAR, CONSIDERING THE ROCKETS, THE CASUALTIES, THE REFUGEES, THE ISOLATED ATTACKS OF TERRORISM (GRENADES) AND THE OVERALL PROSPECTS. THIS COULD CHANGE, SHOULD THERE BE EITHER A MILITARY BREAKTHROUGH BY THE ENEMY, A BAD MAULING OF ONE OR MORE MEKONG CONVOYS, OR A GENERAL DOWNTURN IN THE SUPPLY SITUATION IN THE CITY.
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